

Thinking More than One Way on Egypt

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The last three weeks or so in Egypt have been extraordinary and inspiring. Thousands of ordinary people joined together peacefully to demand the end to a despotic and corrupt regime. It is far from clear what will come next in Egypt, but even that uncertainty should not take away from the events the whole world has just witnessed. Understanding events in Egypt, and what they mean for the future of that country and the broader Middle East is a challenge which requires the ability to look at the issue from different angles and to consider multiple, often conflicting, ideas at the same time.

First, it should be recognized that the events in Egypt were truly amazing. The grace, sophistication and dedication with which the Egyptian people conducted themselves is an inspiration to people all over the world. In December of 2010, few would have believed that President Hosni Mubarak was less than three months away from being peacefully deposed, but he was. However, as inspiring as these events were, it remains true that the future is extremely uncertain. Similar events in other parts of the world have led to democracy, but they have also led to other forms of authoritarian regimes or to little change at all after the initial excitement passed. It is important to recognize this reality and to think about Egypt's future accordingly.

Two poles of interpretation of Egypt have emerged in the U.S. One pole, most frequently believed among the far right, is that this is a dangerous development which will surely lead to an Islamist takeover of Egypt and possibly the Middle East. The other pole is that this is a genuine expression of a yearning for freedom by the Egyptian people which will lead to greater democracy in Egypt and possibly the Middle East. These interpretations both might or might not be true, but they both need to be taken into consideration when thinking about Egypt. Moreover, they need to be disaggregated from the current partisan rancor in the U.S. Concern about possible greater influence by Islamists should not simply be seen as evidence that the person raising that concern is some right wing Fox listener, just as celebrating the achievements of the Egyptian people should not be seen as evidence that the person expressing that does not care about stability, security or fighting terrorism. The new Egypt will probably lie somewhere in the middle of these two poles; and U.S. policy to Egypt and its transition should reflect this.

Because of Mubarak's role in maintaining Egypt's relationship with Israel, his resignation has raised some concern in Israel and among supporters of Israel in the U.S. who fear an anti-Israel government coming to power in Egypt, while people less positively disposed towards Israel greet this possibility with excitement and hope that U.S. Middle East policy after Mubarak may not be so driven by concern about Israel. However, both of these approaches assume that what is good for freedom in Egypt is axiomatically bad for Israel and that any movement by Egypt away from Israel is equally axiomatically good for the Egyptian people. These approaches overlook the rather

obvious possibilities that Egypt could end up with an government that is both hostile to Israel and undemocratic or that a new more democratic government in Egypt might think it wise to maintain a decent relationship with Israel.

Lastly, as the world looks expectantly to see how Egypt will change now that Mubarak is gone, it is also likely that continuity will be a major driving force in Egypt as well. Bringing down Mubarak was easy compared to the task of definitively changing the roles of various institutions such as the military, the problems of corruption, or the habits of the regime. While there will certainly be some changes, there will also be real similarities between Egypt a year, or even five years, from now, and Egypt a year ago. Real revolutions which involve more than just getting rid of an octogenarian despot, and genuinely change how people live and experience daily life, are truly rare. Egypt may achieve this, but it is still too early to tell.

The Egyptian people showed enormous courage and commitment in rising up against an entrenched and repressive dictator. The complexity of the challenges which now face Egypt and, for that matter, the U.S. cannot undermine this, but are also quite serious. A true understanding of these events and their meanings requires the ability to simultaneously consider interpretations and options which may seem counter intuitive or even paradoxical, but an inability to do this will reduce the situation to platitudes and one dimensional policies and cause more harm than good.